

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM

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Testimony

Good morning Congressman Tom Davis and Congressman Chris Van Hollen, and to the rest of the participants in this morning's briefing and thank you for having me here. It is an honor to serve my community as we seek to strengthen our efforts to guide our youth and future generations to make safer and healthier decisions in life. As you may or may not know I have been working with communities locally, nationally, and internationally for the past 12 years attempting to help bring peace and an end to the senseless violence that tragically takes so many of our children and youth away from their loved ones and community.

I sit here before you as the youth violence prevention coordinator in the Department of Health and Human Services in Montgomery County, Maryland. Thanks to the leadership of the County Executive Doug Duncan, Director of Health and Human Services Carolyn Colvin, and Police Chief Tom Manger, and most importantly because the residents and stakeholders of Montgomery County, have seen a redeeming value in my ability to help others leave gang life as well as help end to gang violence. For more than 12 years of my life, I made poor choices which led to several arrests, several assaults, and a near death experience in which I was shot 5 times. Twenty two of my friends and associates have been murdered, and 30 of my friends have been sent to the criminal justice system. My very presence here alone symbolizes the possibility of success and hope for so many of our youth who are caught up in gang life.

Twelve years ago, I met a wise and spiritual man who has been the father I never had. His name is Nane Alejandrez from the National Organization Barrios Unidos that helped me make the transition from gangster to peace warrior. This journey has been one of redemption, spiritual healing, and of many difficult challenges in which my life was in danger from the same individuals that I hoped to help. Last month I took my mother to dinner and for the first time in my life she told me how proud she was of me, to the extent that I fought back the tears, because these were never words that I heard at home or from the same person that just said them. My crusade of non-violence has taken a new role as I am doing my part to create for my children, what I never had as a child.

I want to take this opportunity to share Montgomery County's vision of helping to create a peaceful community where youth do not have to see gangs as the only option, and where youth are valued to the extent that they will hopefully never consider joining gangs in order to feel valued. Thanks to Congressman Frank Wolfe, The Maryland delegation of Senator Barbara Mikulski, Senator Paul Sarbanes, Congressman Chris Van Hollen, Congressman Albert Wynn, and the Montgomery County Council, as well the many valuable members of the Montgomery County Gang Taskforce that helped sponsor and put together a strategy unlike any other jurisdiction where we would utilize the three prong approach of prevention, intervention, and suppression to address the county's gang issue.

For example, through the joint county efforts of Montgomery and Prince George's County, we just opened the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center (CYOC) in the Takoma Park/Langley Park area. Ironically, the CYOC represents the possibility of hope and inspiration for young people at a crossroads in life. In two months of operation we have served 100 youth and families, predominantly Latino and African American, where we have provided mentoring, positive youth development, behavioral health and mental health services, case management, retreats, recreational opportunities, family building program, job training and placement, group support for incarcerated youth, re-entry case management, tattoo removal, relocation and safety planning, and legal support and representation. I have to quote a two African American youth who recently came into the CYOC, and told me that they came because a police officer referred them to the center and that they themselves were sick and tired of being sick and tired and no longer wished to gang bang.

We have had rival members of several different gangs come together under the banner not of their gangs, but of the fruitful opportunities that the center offers, because finally, someone has reached out to them and brought them to the table to help put an end to this madness. We have a partnership with our County Corrections through the leadership of Director Art Wallenstein, where those inmates who are returning to the community are provided with case management before they are released that assess their needs and ensure they are provided with preparation services that will enable them successfully transition back to the community, thereby reducing the possibility of getting involved in the criminal justice system.

We have a multi disciplinary team that meets on a monthly basis that consists of the police, schools, local management board, and other stakeholders that work to provide prevention and early intervention to youth who have not been incarcerated or high level gang members, and provide them and their families with wrap around services to ensure that they do not end up in the criminal justice system. This was made possible because one of our biggest assets in the police department reached out and said we have to get to these kids before they are locked up. Through our recreation department, we have the Sports Academy's that allow youth that do not achieve the minimum 2.0 gpa requirement, but are at risk of gang involvement or members of gangs and provide them with the opportunity of positive life affirming activity and academic reinforcement and enrichment in order for them to achieve that 2.0 gpa and hopefully even higher.

Through our victim services partnership with the Police Department we identify resources that are needed to sometime relocate youth or families that are in potential danger because that youth has left gang life. I could sit here and tell you about how successful we are in Montgomery County, but we still have a long way to go until we hopefully get to that point where youth stay out of gangs. In addition, we have further strengthened our coordination efforts by establishing a youth provider council that consists of all the youth service providers in Montgomery County, where we have begun a process where all youth serving organizations use a commonly shared philosophical approach to working with gang involved youth, as well as those youth that are at risk of gang membership, and their families. This was aided by our sponsoring a joint county training for 200 participants, where three gang coordinators from Northern Virginia attended and were provided with the tools to effectively work with gang involved youth and help them to make the transition out of gang life. We have now begun to coordinate a solution based community awareness and education effort where we provide the community with sound strategies for addressing the gang issue. This effort has developed a strong cultural sensitivity that addresses the needs of the diverse community in Montgomery County. We have also established a youth leadership council that consists of former gang members that meet on a monthly basis to ensure that our efforts are headed in the right direction to better serve our youth. Members of that youth leadership council have gone to schools, community meetings, and even met with our steering committee headed by our police chief and director of DHHS. Most importantly those youth are now positive assets in our community, no longer bringing negativity to the community. Some of them recently participated in a congressional briefing for this subcommittee several months ago.

You may think I am making a big deal of this and I am! I say this because it is the responsibility of a society to create a community that nurtures the power of what youth can bring to our society in a positive manner, and it is only when we fail to do that that youth make bad choices. We must get away from only acknowledging those things that are negative, but focus more on the positive things that our youth do everyday.

However, we must always keep educating our community, especially youth and families of the consequences of gang life. One member of our youth leadership council is now working at an agency doing HIV outreach to the same communities where he was once seen gang banging; another youth is working with a large construction company called Shapiro and Duncan as the safety compliance Officer, where he is recruiting other youth caught in the crazy life to get sound and meaningful jobs where they can begin the process of healing. Two members of the council that were once sworn enemies are working along other members of our taskforce where they decide on what programs should be funded to address the gang issue in the county. I will never forget that call two weeks ago when these young men asked me why they had just received all these proposals and what were they supposed to do with it? They could not believe that the community valued their leadership some much that they wanted them of all people to help chose what we fund for our summer and fall activities.

I want to also caution policy makers to understand that gangs are not exclusive to only Latinos. Our African American community is also impacted by gangs and gang violence, and we must ensure that all our efforts address the needs of the full diversity of our communities. For the past couple of years we have put a high profile to Latino gangs because of several high profile crimes; however, we can not lose sight of other impacted communities. We have done this successfully through our CYOC. I conclude by thanking all of you for your time and attention to this very important matter, and hope we can spread this effort out on a regional level, because as we all know, gangs do not operate within borders and migrate, hence, we have to provide our youth with what my mentor would call “A better deal” where they will be Loved, valued, and recognized for doing the right things, after all ladies and gentlemen, most often that is the reason youth turn to gangs as an option. I did not realize this until this past year, but my mentor demonstrated how the values of a healthy family and of a gang are so similar, but yet different in the long run. Youth will take advantage of a better deal, we just need to offer it to them and in order to do that successfully, it will require individuals that have been there and done that to make it appealing to youth. Remember, when gangs recruit children and youth they use crafty brainwashing strategies to sell the idea of gang membership like the next best thing to slice bread. Ladies and Gentlemen we have to do a better job of selling what we bring to the table, which is what they really want anyway.

Thank you,

